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The Mexican Slums: Tinderbox or Safety Valve?

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An Intelligence Assessment

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GI 85-10159
June 1985

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The Mexican Slums: Tinderbox or Safety Valve?

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by

Office of Global Issues, with a contribution by Analytic Support Group.

Comments and queries are welcome and may be directed to the Chief, Geography Division, OGI

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The Mexican Slums: Tinderbox or Safety Valve?

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Key Judgments

Information available as of 15 May 1985 was used in this report.

Despite periodic alarms from foreign and Mexican observers, Mexico's urban slums have long exerted—and continue to exert—a stabilizing influence on the nation's political life. However, as the urban population begins to bump against the ceiling of resource availability, perhaps before the end of the 1990s, what has been a safety valve could become a tinderbox.

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The stabilizing influence of Mexico's large and growing slums, paradoxical as it may seem, is based on very real benefits received by the urban poor:

- As the inner-city slum *(vecindad)* has given way to the outlying squatter settlement or workers' subdivision *(colonia proletaria)*, the ratio of "landowners" to renters among the urban poor has steadily increased. At present, probably more than half of all urban poor families are in some sense landholders.

- Although most building sites in the *colonias* are initially held illegally, legal title is usually granted to the slumdweller after a period of time. This unplanned transfer of land from the haves (including the government) to the have-nots constitutes a huge redistribution of wealth—possibly more important both economically and politically than all the rural land reforms of Mexican governments since the revolution.

- A minority of the urban poor are able to use their property in the *colonia* as the basis for establishing successful businesses and (in a few cases) rising into the middle class. Money—to purchase a taxi, to stock a store, to buy another lot in the *colonia*—can be borrowed against the property. In other cases, the property itself is turned into a restaurant, rooming house, automobile repair shop, or other business.

- Numerous studies and surveys indicate that the vast majority of the urban poor believe that they have improved their living conditions by coming to live in the *colonia* because they now own their "own home" or can "avoid paying rent."

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The stabilizing influence of the slum is increased by its heterogeneous character. In almost all present-day Mexican slums a wide variation exists in incomes and economic interests. A policeman's hovel is next to that of a pickpocket, a long-established white-collar worker lives down the street from a destitute and illiterate peasant uprooted from a distant village, a

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small-scale employer lives next to his (or more likely her) workers. Moreover, most of the male population have jobs outside the slum and their political and economic interests are more closely related to their workplace than to where they live. In short, except for certain very local grievances, the typical slum has too much diversity for successful mass action outside the system. Like other Mexicans, the urban poor substantially support the ruling political party with its national revolutionary legacy.

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The environment of the urban poor is changing, however, especially in greater Mexico City, where most of the urban poor are located. Mexican planners hope to hold the Mexico City population to 21.3 million in the year 2000. about 20 million people is the most that the Valley of Mexico—essentially the area available for greater Mexico City—can accommodate, because of water and other resource constraints. The population of greater Mexico City is now 16.3 million, compared with 13.6 million in 1980, and at its present rate of growth will reach 21 million in 1990.

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Political fallout is less likely to result from declines in the quality of life in the cities than from Mexican Government attempts to reverse those declines by stopping migration into the Valley and encouraging native-born residents to leave the capital. In other words, shutting off the safety valve. The easy tolerance of land invasions and less-than-legal titles will probably end, and petitions for extended basic services—especially water—will be rejected. Taxes and fees may well be raised to many times their former levels and their collection rigorously enforced. In extreme cases, well-established squatters with years of residence may be forced out by police or military action and their homes bulldozed. At the same time, strenuous efforts will be made to keep migrants in rural villages and to divert residents from Mexico City to secondary cities—increasing pressures and lowering living standards in both cases.

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The urban crisis will come—if not by 1990, then by 1995 or 2000—but it may not be accompanied by violence and political instability. The crisis probably will be manifested in a breakdown of transportation and waste disposal services and, especially in Mexico City, by severe water shortages. Both the government and many of the urban poor themselves apparently recognize the seriousness of the problems and are making adjustments. To some extent, these adjustments—which range from government subsidies for underpopulated areas to an individual's decision to go to the United

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States rather than to Mexico City—will lessen the need for harsher action later on. Moreover, even under conditions of extreme provocation, the patience of the Mexican poor should not be underestimated. Indeed, increased economic privation could have the unexpected effect of increasing the value of patron-client relationships—always the Mexican's lifeline in a crisis—and thereby strengthening the system.

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Figure 1

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The Mexican Slums: Tinderbox or Safety Valve?

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Introduction

Traditionally, the urban poor have been a stabilizing force in Mexican society. Although there were a number of *tumultos,* or lower-class riots, during the latter part of the colonial period, these were short-lived affairs that burned themselves out without need for suppression and had little or no political effect. During Mexico's almost two centuries as an independent nation, even *tumultos* have been few and far between. Over decades of civil war and revolution, peasant armies marched, students rioted, politicians plotted, union workers erected barricades, and generals revolted—only the urban poor remained quiet.

Today, however, Mexico is a very different country. By US standards, and even by Latin American standards, the great majority of Mexican urbanites are poor. Although the poorest of the poor continue to live in rural areas, the urbanization of Mexico—from 35 percent in 1940 to 66 percent in 1980—has been accompanied by the urbanization of poverty. The urban poor comprise 45 to 50 percent of the urban population, or 17 to 20 million people. Since the financial crisis of 1982, economic activity has declined by an average of 0.8 percent a year and the condition of the urban poor has further deteriorated. Some observers of the Mexican scene believe that this situation constitutes a grave threat to stability. They note that the modern lower-class Mexican, unlike his counterpart of a few decades ago, is well aware of the huge difference in living standards within the cities. Observers also point out that income distribution in Mexico, already one of the most unequal in Latin America, is becoming steadily more skewed against the poor and question whether the slumdwellers' patience will survive continued economic stress.

In this paper, we make a detailed study of slums in Mexico's three largest cities,

We examine the numbers and characteristics of the urban poor and the changing patterns of lower-class residence. Within the slums, we look at living conditions, attitudes, and degree of political integration. We also assess some specific problems of Mexican cities and the solutions proposed by local and national authorities. Finally, we make a judgment as to whether Mexico's slums remain a stabilizing factor or have indeed become a tinderbox.

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The Urban Poor and Where They Live

Who Are the Urban Poor?

Despite a history of economic growth almost unparalleled in the Third World—averaging more than 6 percent a year between the mid-1930s and 1982—Mexico remains a poor country. Per capita income in 1980 was only $1,800—well under the official poverty level in the United States of $4,290 for the same year. Even if a generous allowance is made for cost-of-living differences between the two countries, the average Mexican lives in abject poverty. This situation is made worse by the pattern of income distribution. in the mid-1970s, the lowest 50 percent of Mexican households receive only 17 percent of the total income, compared with 20 percent of total income in Argentina and 25 percent in the United States. The top 20 percent in Mexico receive 57 percent, compared with 54 percent in Argentina and 41 percent in the United States

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While the poorest of the poor continue to live in the countryside, most of Mexico's poor now live in urban areas. Although the average rural-urban migrant improves his economic stature by migration, the improvement is often marginal. Moreover, opportunities to supplement food supplies through subsistence agriculture—while not entirely absent in the cities—are much more limited. If we use

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the per capita income in the Federal District as a proxy for incomes in greater Mexico City, we see that the average inhabitant of the city earned roughly US $3,000 in 1980 and probably about US $2,000 in 1984. Assuming that the mid-1970s national income distribution still holds for greater Mexico City, the lower 50 percent of the city's population had an average income of only US $1,020 in 1980 and US $680 in 1984. (The decline reflects the impact of currency change and an absolute decline in GDP in 1982-83.) Incomes in other urban areas are rarely better than those of Mexico City and in many cases are far worse.

Nonetheless, average urban Mexicans do not consider themselves to be poor and, in terms of social and political stability, perceptions are more important than reality. If we define the urban poor as those working for the minimum wage or less (and their dependents), our definition would probably approximate that of the average Mexican observer.[1] Using this definition, the urban poor numbered roughly 17 to 20 million—45 to 50 percent of the urban population—in 1980.[2] Nine million of this total lived in greater Mexico City.

It should be emphasized that our middle-class Mexican definition of poverty would not be accepted by many of the poor themselves. Numerous studies show that Mexican slumdwellers tend to avoid categorizing themselves as "poor"—the "poor" family is the one that lives next door or down the street or in the next *colonia*.

Where Do They Come From?

Unlike the stereotype of the peasant stuck in his village or the unskilled worker stuck in his slum, the average poor Mexican has been geographically—if not economically—mobile. From the time of the Revolution of 1910, if not before, peasants have made temporary migrations far from their villages to seek agricultural work in other Mexican states or, legally or illegally, in the United States. Some go to the cities. Zapotec-speaking Indians from Oaxaca can be found not only doing construction work in Mexico City but also washing dishes in Chicago. In this respect, the urban poor are no different from their rural compatriots. The "Sanchez" of Oscar Lewis's famous study was born in a rural village in Veracruz and lived out his life in a variety of Mexico City slums, often moving several times within a single decade.[3] His children wandered from slum to slum, from Mexico City to Puebla and Veracruz and back again. Like many thousand others, one of Sanchez's sons migrated seasonally to the United States as a fieldworker under the Bracero program. 25X1 25X1

In contrast to the 1940s and 1950s, the heyday of Mexican rural-urban migration, a majority of today's urban poor come from other urban areas. Kathleen Logan, in her late 1970s study of Santa Cecilia, a Guadalajara slum, noted that less than 50 percent of the residents were recent rural migrants. 25X1 25X1 25X1

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In 1984 only 40 percent of Mexico City slumdwellers had lived for more than 12 years in the slum or shantytown in which they were presently living. Eighteen percent had lived there for less than three years. In Guadalajara, some 50 percent of slumdwellers had lived in their present residences for five years or less, and in Monterrey it was about 43 percent. 25X1 25X1 25X1

[1] The daily minimum wage in 1980 ranged from US $4.52 in the poor southern state of Chiapas to US $7.61 in the relatively wealthy Baja California, Norte.

[2] Another measure of poverty, developed by the World Bank in *Income Distribution and Poverty in Mexico*, published in June 1980, conventionally considers a family income equal to one-third the national average as a "relative poverty" line. According to the Bank's data and formula, 23 to 34 percent—or roughly 2.5 to 3.7 million—of the Mexican households were in poverty in 1977. These calculations are biased toward the lower wage structure and greater poverty in the rural areas and identify only one-quarter—or 4.3 to 5 million—of the poor people in urban areas.

[3] Oscar Lewis, *The Children of Sanchez. The Autobiography of a Mexican Family*, New York: Vintage Books, 1961. Sanchez is the pseudonym of a typical slumdweller in Mexico City, interviewed by Lewis over a period of years. 25X1 25X1

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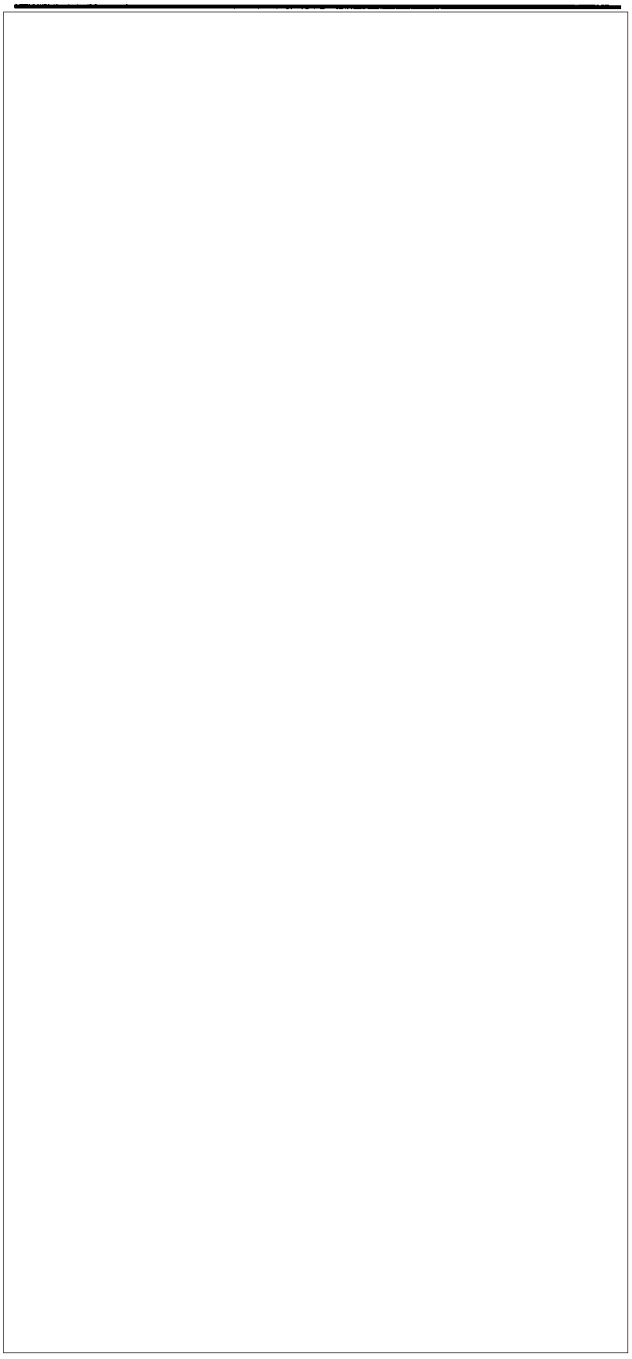

The number of migrants from rural areas continues to increase, although making up a small part of the urban poor. For Mexico as a whole, some 725,000 rural Mexicans migrate to the city each year. roughly 50 percent of this flow goes to greater Mexico City; 8 percent to Guadalajara; 6 percent to Monterrey; and 36 percent to other urban areas, largely along the US-Mexican border. Migrants generally move directly from their places of origin to the city. Step migration in which the migrant moves in sequence to larger and larger urban centers, such as occurs in some other parts of the Third World, is largely unknown in Mexico. Most travel relatively short distances—the average journey is between 240 and 320 kilometers—and the vast majority consider no other place than the chosen city once the decision to migrate has been made.

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Where Do They Live?

John F. C. Turner, a noted authority on Latin American urbanization, divides Mexico City's slums into four categories: *vecindades* (tenements), *colonias proletaria* (workers' subdivisions), *ciudades perdidas* (lost cities), and *conjuntos subsidiados* (subsidized housing groups). We eliminated the last category, *conjuntos subsidiados*, from this study. These groups, which house only about 100,000 people in Mexico City, are not slums and are not considered as such by Mexicans. Although originally built to house the poor, these units were quickly snatched up by the middle class, often government bureaucrats.

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The original Mexican urban slum is what Turner calls the *classic vecindad,* a block-large, inner-city building that may well have originally been a colonial palace. In the 1950s, when Oscar Lewis was writing his classic study of Mexican poverty, this was the usual residence of the urban poor. Most *vecindades* consisted of rows of one- and two-room apartments facing a common patio. Water and toilet facilities were usually housed in a common shed in the back of the patio. Casa Grande, the *classic vecindad* described by Lewis, had 157 households and a total population of about 700. Many of these *vecindades* still exist in downtown Mexico City, and, as rents are controlled, are still considered desirable by many poor Mexicans.

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More common, however, are *vecindades nuevas.* These may consist of any type of building in the

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Figure 2
Mexico City Metropolitan Area

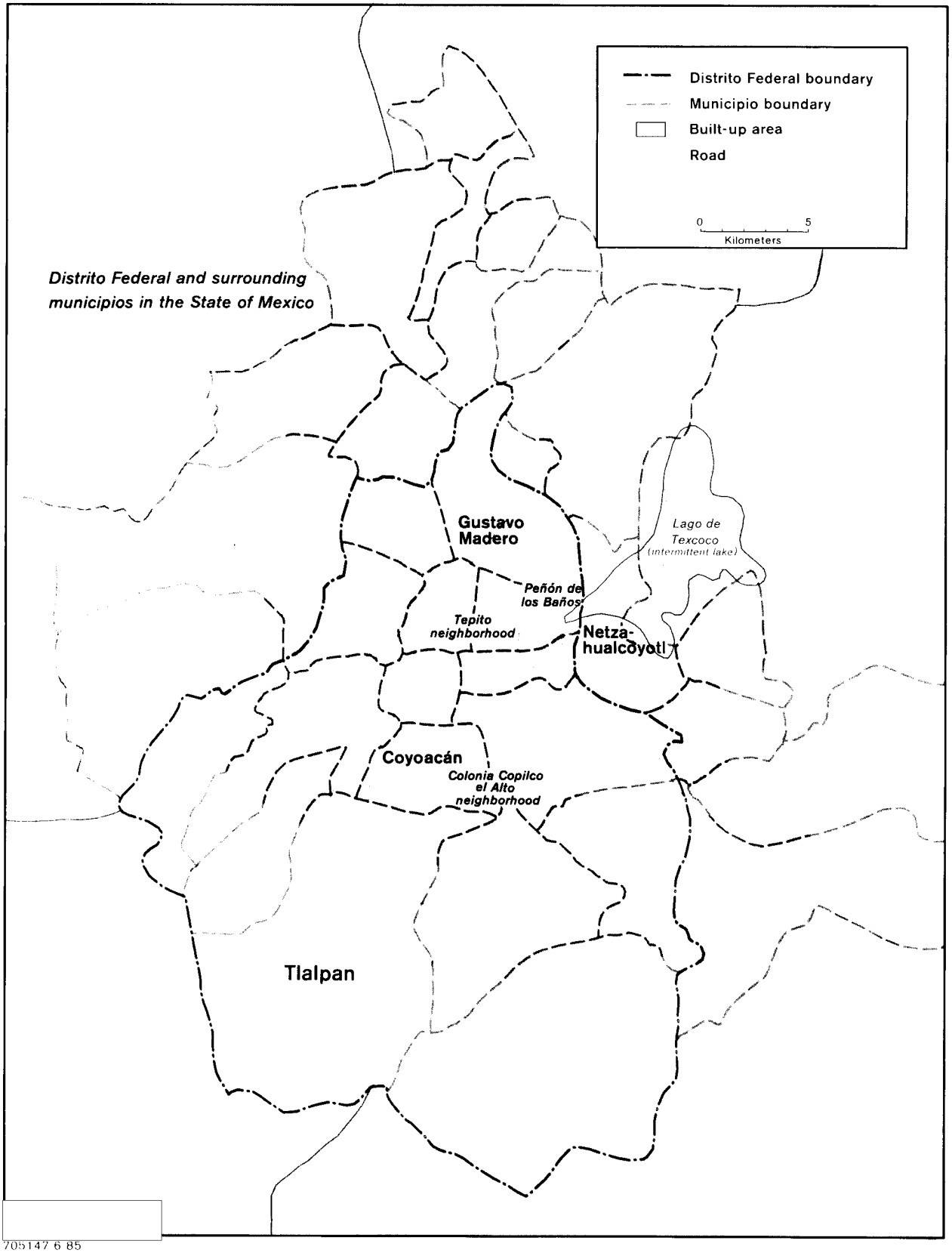

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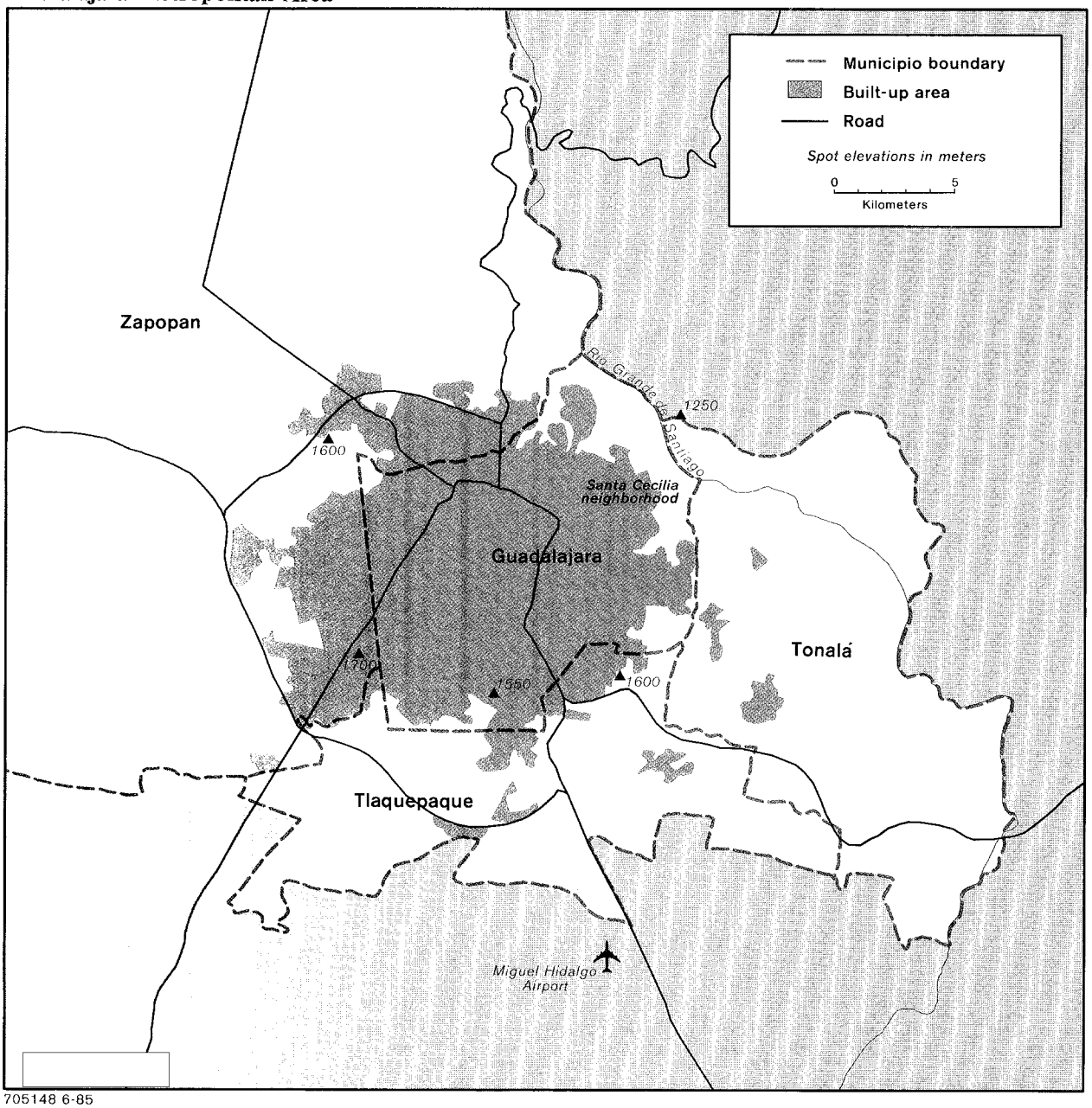
Figure 3
Guadalajara Metropolitan Area



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central city or the intermediate ring. Rents are usually not controlled. *Vecindades nuevas* are almost always smaller than the *classic vecindades*. Panaderos, a *vecindad nueva* described by Lewis, had 12 windowless one-room apartments and lacked both a patio and piped water. Many early rural migrants came first to a *vecindad nueva* before eventually settling in one of the outlying *colonias proletarias*.

In central Mexico City the building constitutes the slum. The residents of a particular building have little to do with residents of nearby buildings and have almost no feeling of belonging to a "neighborhood." For example, both Casa Grande and Panaderos are

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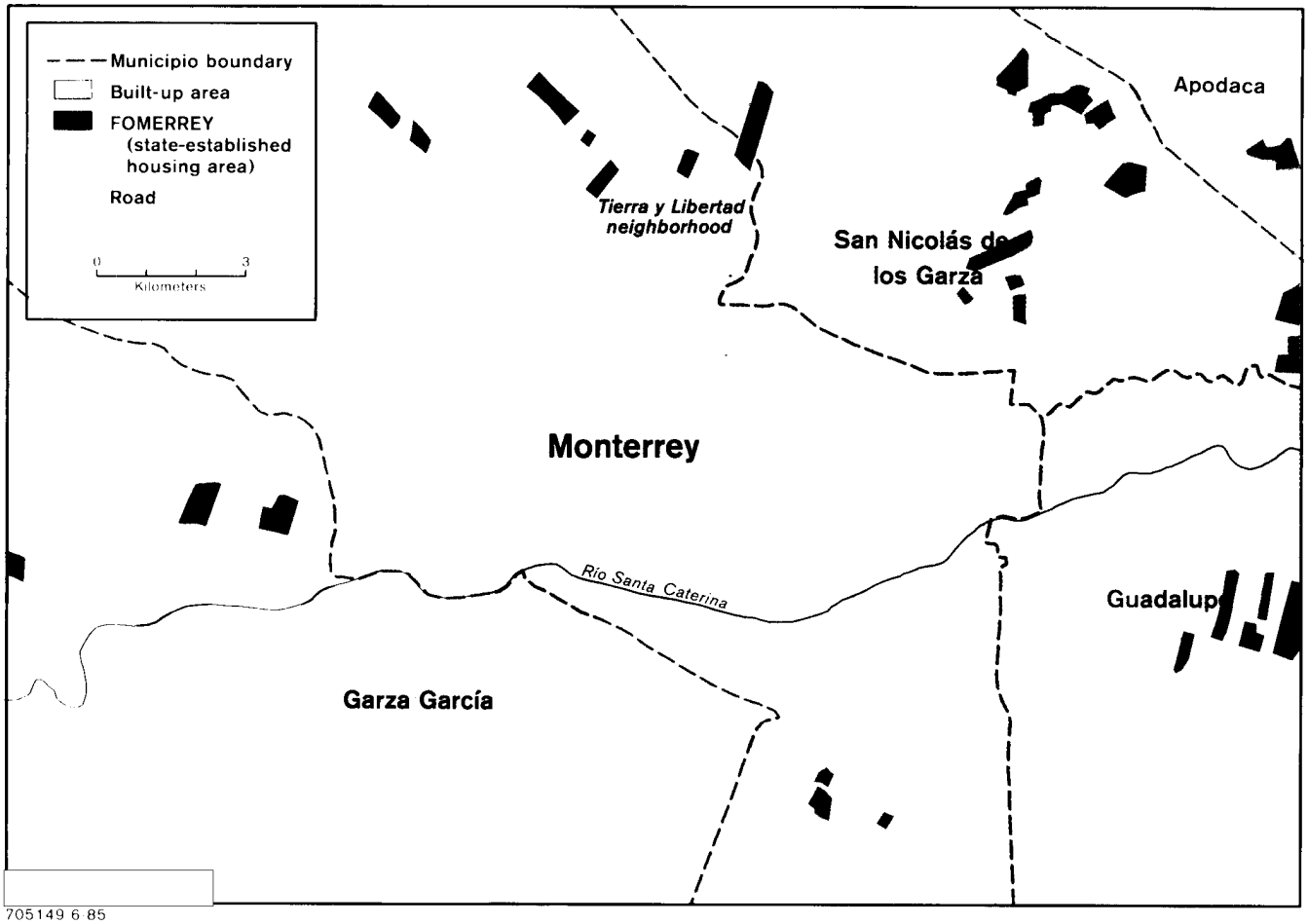
Figure 4
Monterrey Metropolitan Area



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part of the neighborhood known as Tepito. Although most middle-class Mexicans think of Tepito as a homogeneous slum, Tepito is not the relevant unit for the residents. They do not consider themselves residents of Tepito but rather of Casa Grande or Panaderos.

In 1961, when Lewis continued the story of the Sanchez family in a sequel study, the *colonia proletaria* was beginning to replace the *vecindad,* and today most people live in this type of housing. Sanchez himself, at one point, moved to one of these shantytowns before moving back to the central city. Turner further divides these *colonias* into *fraccionamientos* (subdivisions) and *colonias paracaidistas* (parachutist colonies). The *fraccionamientos,* of which Santa Cecilia in Guadalajara is a good example, differ from the *colonias paracaidistas* in that in the former case the lots are purchased, with the purchaser receiving some type of title. Often these titles are not legal, however, usually because the subdivider did not have a clear legal title to the land himself. In the case of the *colonias paracaidistas,* the land is seized illegally by squatters who "parachute" onto unused land on the edge of the city.

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In both types of *colonias proletarias,* the residents see themselves as "owners" and see their property as a means of family investment as well as a place to live. In most cases, this view is justified as legal titles are usually eventually granted—though sometimes only

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after years of petition. In both *fraccionamientos* and *colonias paracaidistas,* the housing is built by the families themselves. Typically, with time, the tar-paper, tin, and adobe one-room shack gives way to more solid and larger structures. In 15 to 20 years, the older areas of these "shantytowns" become indistinguishable from other sections of the city. Many of the owners are now in a position to rent out a part of their dwelling to other urban poor moving out from the central city.

Although *colonias proletarias* make up the overwhelming share of Mexican slums today and are clearly the wave of the future, the poorest of the urban poor continue to live in *ciudades perdidas.* These lost cities, though individually very temporary, have long existed as an institution. In the early part of the century, long before the advent of the shantytowns, they coexisted with the *vecindades* and provided basic housing for the very poor. These "cities" are usually very small, occupying a vacant lot or even a blocked alley in the inner city or the intermediate ring. Construction is rudimentary and services, such as water and electricity, are usually lacking. Although many of these *ciudades perdidas* are short lived, some persist for years or decades. In these, rents are sometimes collected, either by the legal owner of the land or by the previous resident of the particular shack occupied. Some 200,000 people probably live in Mexico City's *ciudades perdidas;* they are found much less frequently in other Mexican cities.

Guadalajara and Monterrey have not had the same housing development patterns as Mexico City. Guadalajara is a beautiful city with a tradition of civic pride; most of its urban poor live in *fraccionamientos,* or land developments for self-built housing, and there is little squatter activity. In Monterrey, the local government and private developers had emphasized commerce and industry and ignored the needs of the urban poor. In response, large squatter housing areas were erected in the early 1970s under the leadership of a local, radical group known as *Tierra y Libertad* (TyL), which sought control and automony of the areas. At this point, the State of Nuevo Leon created a unique program, the *Fomento Metropolitan de Monterrey* (FOMERREY) to provide housing opportunities to the urban poor. Since 1974, FOMERREY has served 63,000 families in developments that range from small plots with some utilities for self-built homes to FOMERREY-built homes with all utilities.

Table 1
Income of Santa Cecilia, Guadalajara

Monthly Earnings (*US $*)	Percent of Households
200 or more	7
160 to 199	21
120 to 159	30
80 to 119	14
79 or less	28

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The Heterogeneous *Colonia*

With the exception of the *ciudades perdidas* described in the last section, Mexican slums rarely have economically homogeneous populations. Even the inner-city *vecindades* are far more heterogeneous than outsiders generally believe. Older residents may remain in a *vecindad* to take advantage of controlled rents or a convenient downtown location long after increasing incomes have lifted them out of the ranks of the very poor. Almost all of the large inner-city tenements juxtapose families making far less than the minimum wage with others making three or four times the minimum wage.

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What is true of the *vecindades* is even more true of the *colonias proletarias* away from the city's center. Logan, in her study of the Guadalajara *fraccionamiento* Santa Cecilia, notes that at the time of her study (late 1970s) 7 percent of the families made more than US $200 a month, whereas less than 3 percent of all Mexican families had such incomes. The range of incomes in Santa Cecilia can be seen in table 1.

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In the Mexico City slums studied, 14 percent of the families in the best serviced neighborhood earned less than US $58 monthly, and 22 percent of the families

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This vecindad nueva *near the University of Mexico has two rooms on the left facing two more out of view. Another eight to 10 rooms are farther down the alley. Mexico City, 1981.*

A jacal *built on the highway right-of-way using 5-gallon containers nailed over scrap lumber. Clusters of* jacales *form* ciudades perdidas *in downtown alleys. Mexico City, 1981.*

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A back street in the municipio *of Netzahualcoyotl where sewage runs down unpaved street and electric wires hum above. Dramatic improvements have occurred in this slum, but problems still remain in areas. Mexico City, 1981.*

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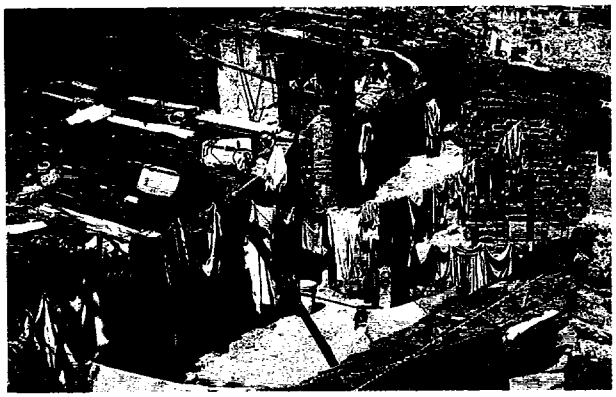

Two photographs of Colonia Copilco el Alto, *Mexico City, show its range of housing from* jacales, *or shacks (above), to middle-class housing (right). Mexico City, 1979.*

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Figure 5. Housing Types

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Table 2
Income Distribution of Surveyed Slum Households, 1984 [a]

Percent

Monthly Earnings (*US $*)	Mexico City				Guadalajara				Monterrey			
	High	Med	Low	Total	High	Med	Low	Total	High	Med	Low	Total
Over 173	23	24	22	23	35	19	4	20	14	18	14	15
116 to 173	29	29	26	28	14	27	18	19	24	20	23	22
58 to 115	34	31	36	34	29	40	47	39	57	47	55	53
Up to 58	13	15	14	14	19	12	24	18	3	12	5	7
No income	1	1	2	1	3	2	7	4	2	3	3	3

[a] Slums are ranked high, medium, or low according to degree of access to public services, such as electricity, water, and sewage.

[redacted] 25X1

in the poorest serviced *colonia* had an income in excess of US $173. A similar heterogeneous pattern is found in the slums of Monterrey. In Guadalajara the pattern is more homogeneous, with higher income households in the neighborhood with a high degree of access to services and lower income families in the *colonia* with little access to services. [redacted]

There is a relationship between length of residence in the neighborhood and degree of access to services. In Guadalajara and Monterrey about one-third of those living in the *colonias* with good access to public services had lived in the neighborhood for more than 12 years. In Mexico City over half of those in the neighborhood with medium access to services had resided in the area for over 12 years. All the neighborhoods surveyed, however, had a relatively large number of residents who had lived there less than two years, suggesting a vital mix of well-established residents and recent arrivals. [redacted]

Quality of Life

Perceptions

Almost all recent studies of Third World slums agree that slumdwellers tend to be more upbeat about their living conditions than are outside observers. Nowhere is this more true than in Mexico. As Logan points out in her study of Santa Cecilia, even Mexican social workers with long experience in the slum were much more negative about slum conditions than were the residents themselves. The social workers, mostly Guadalajarans of the upper middle class, described the residents as personally and socially isolated with a "crowded and unsanitary way of life" and "very poor people" who "lack necessities" and are "disorganized and without plans." [redacted] 25X1 25X1

The residents themselves use much different terms to describe their situation:

- "It is a very pretty place, with much enthusiasm and joy, and with much poverty."
- "For me, it is fine. First of all, we are very comfortable. Second, it is very tranquil, very pleasing here. There are stores. We don't need to go to downtown Guadalajara to buy things."
- "It is a very religious, very noble community. The people are very hard working."
- "It is a very active and dynamic place. Very *lista*. Very pretty. It is my home and I like it. How very pretty it is!" [redacted] 25X1

[redacted] In the three 25X1
Mexico City slums, 74 percent claimed that their 25X1
living conditions had improved by coming to live in the *colonia*. In Monterrey the figure was 73 percent, and in Guadalajara it was 62 percent. It should be noted that even a majority of those residents who remained at the lowest socioeconomic level claimed that their conditions had improved. [redacted] 25X1

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Table 3
Attitudes Toward Basic Services

Percent [a]

	Housing		Water Supply		Sewer and Drainage		Public Transport		Medical Care		Foodstores	
	S	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S	D	S	D
Mexico City	83	15	64	35	44	53	64	35	66	30	52	45
Guadalajara	71	16	50	48	69	25	64	26	72	21	62	28
Monterrey	87	12	70	29	55	45	82	17	81	15	78	18

[a] Percentage of Satisfied and Dissatisfied. The difference in these two figures is the percentage of indifference.

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Housing

The stated reason that most slumdwellers gave for coming to their particular *colonia* was to own their own home or "to avoid paying rent." In this they have been largely successful. Home ownership is 70 percent in the Mexico City slums, 77 percent in Guadalajara, and 75 percent in Monterrey. Although the titles of some of these "homeowners" may be nonexistent or disputed, they correctly perceive themselves to be in a very different position from renters. Squatters are rarely evicted from established *colonias* and—in time—legal titles can usually be obtained.

Slums display a wide variety of housing—from hovels to modern-looking, middle-class residences. A temporary shelter is often erected in the rear of a house site so that the more substantial cement block and tile roofed structure can be built. Commonly, friends and relatives help build a family's home on weekends and after work. Resembling the American farm tradition of a barn raising, this volunteer labor is repaid by the new homeowner family when it, in turn, donates labor to the others' home projects.

Households in all the areas studied in the 1984 survey are crowded. Although the majority of units had no more than two rooms, it was usual to have five or more people per unit. In the three Mexico City *colonias*, the average household had 6.5 persons, compared with 5.0 persons for Mexico City as a whole. In Guadalajara and Monterrey as a whole, the average number of persons per household in 1980 was 5.6 and 5.5, respectively, but in the neighborhoods surveyed in 1984 the average was 5.7 and 6.2 persons per household, respectively. Households in the well-serviced areas in all three cities are as crowded as those in the poorly serviced areas.

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Basic Services

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As might be expected, residents of areas with most services are generally more satisfied than those living in areas with minimal or no basic services (table 3). Surprisingly, however, the level of satisfaction between the haves and the have-nots does not vary more than 10 percentage points, except for foodstores in Mexico City (24 percentage points), medical care in Guadalajara (21 percentage points), and sewers and drainage in all of the cities surveyed (30 to 50 percentage points). The greatest difference of opinion between the male and female population occurs in Guadalajara where, for reasons that are not clear, 11 percent more males than females are dissatisfied with the water supply. There is no appreciable difference of opinion concerning services among the three age groups.

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Water service, however, has lagged in Mexico's urban areas. The percentage of households with direct access to water either dropped or remained constant in

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This Mexico City squatter is scrimping and saving to buy a few bags of cement or a few dozen bricks. After he accumulates enough materials, he will build a larger, permanent home. Mexico City, 1974.

After the land ownership is cleared and building materials amassed, a work party will gather to erect the new house. Mexico City, 1981.

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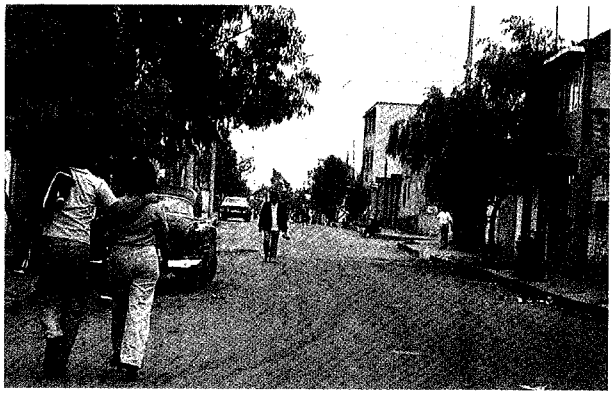
A squatter's colonia, *or* colonia paracaidista, *in the beginning is coarse. Here the water pipes run aboveground and a crude street is being constructed through lava. Mexico City, 1971.*



The same colonia *10 years later. Paved streets, indoor plumbing, and two- and three-story buildings are common. Mexico City. 1981.*

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Even in a poor area of Netzahualcoyotl, a beauty shop offers haircuts, styling, tinting, and manicures. On the dry lakebed, a planter box and tree show pride of ownership. Mexico City, 1981.

Shops and late-model pickup truck show the upward economic mobility of their owners in this Mexico City colonia, *1979.*

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Figure 6. Quality of Life

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the three cities. In Netzahualcoyotl (Netza) less than 60 percent of houses had water in 1980. Other low-income areas in Mexico City also showed little improvement in access to water.

Education

in Guadalajara have particularly low levels of educational achievement, with nearly 70 percent of those in the poorly serviced area reporting less than a primary school education. Mexico City and Monterrey are somewhat better, but there is a tendency for those in the poorly serviced area to be less educated.

Health and Life Expectancy

Most urban poor were satisfied or very satisfied with the availability of medical care in their neighborhoods, according to the 1984 survey. This however, does not indicate satisfactory levels of health in the slums, but, rather, that the residents believe their conditions are caused by poverty rather than the lack of facilities. The poor use home remedies, consult midwives, and delay seeking professional health care until acute problems develop.

Factors that increase life expectancy, such as sufficient income, better housing, piped water and sewage, are lacking in the poor urban areas, and life expectancy there is lower than the Mexican average of 66 years and much less than the US national average of 74 years. A 1972 study of Mexico City demonstrated that the highest crude death rates were associated with the poorest housing. In Penon de los Banos, a slum north of the airport, child death rates from gastroenteritis and from diseases of early infancy ran three times the Mexico City average, and from respiratory disease more than twice the average. In poor housing built on bare ground, higher death rates from bronchopneumonia and allied diseases for children and adults occurred, especially in September toward the end of the rainy season.

Poverty rather than poor housing seems characteristic of those, mainly adults, who died from diabetes and cirrhosis of the liver. Inner-city, deteriorating *vecindades* had water and sewage facilities but revealed an extremely high death rate from cirrhosis of the liver, a disease linked to alcoholism.

In the 1980s the national government initiated a special health program for the urban poor, the majority of whom are not covered by the existing social security system. This program targets the reduction of gastrointestinal and acute respiratory diseases caused by primitive and crowded housing and offers inoculations against several contagious diseases.

Malnutrition adds to the health problems of the poor. A significantly high proportion of the underweight and undernourished children live in poor housing. Limited economically to cheap and filling foods, such as corn, beans, and chilies, their diet has perpetuated vitamin and protein deficiencies.

Work and Income

in most urban poor families several individuals work and pool their incomes. in Mexico City, on the average, two persons are employed per household, and, of those, 1.2 persons per household are employed full-time. The average number employed per household in Guadalajara is similar to that in Mexico City. Monterrey has the lowest number of employed persons per household (1.4), and the three types of neighborhoods have the same low employment level. Many slum households in Monterrey are subsisting on one income, in contrast to Mexico City and Guadalajara, where most households have two wage earners.

In the three cities the urban poor had lower unemployment rates than the cities as a whole, probably reflecting the fact that the poor cannot afford to remain unemployed and will accept any economic activity. The officially unemployed (less than 6 percent in 1984) tend to be either extremely handicapped or young and relatively well-educated workers entering the market for the first time. People who find work as street vendors, lottery and newspaper salesmen, day laborers, and personal servants are usually considered as underemployed. Many form part of Mexico's vast informal economic sector.

Mexico City dominates the national employment market and continues to offer the best and widest

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variety of nonagricultural job opportunities.

Guadalajara is a regional commercial hub with a strong agricultural base. Construction is the single largest employer in the city and it is unionized. The unions are weak, however, in part, as a result of the overabundance of unskilled and semiskilled workers.

Monterrey has a large share of Mexico's iron and steel industry. While the city's position at the northern frontier has encouraged its trade with the United States, the nearby commercial establishments across the border have retarded the growth of the city's commercial sector. As a result, the occupational structure of Monterrey was less diverse than in Guadalajara or Mexico City.

Coping Strategies

All the urban poor use similar strategies for coping, by minimizing waste and maximizing money-earning opportunities. Older children and housewives may sell a variety of items in the market or on the street. Some sell food, such as roasted corn, candy, fruit, tacos, or enchiladas. Others sell toys, combs, mirrors, or other cheap objects. Still others offer handcrafted items they have made or secondhand goods they have scavenged. Residents who have unoccupied space or are near unused land frequently grow produce or raise chickens, rabbits, or pigs for home consumption or to sell. Occasionally, they may turn a small patio or home into a tiny restaurant. Money may also be raised through a *tanda*, or money exchange. A *tanda* is an informal savings mechanism in which four to eight trusted neighbors or relatives contribute monthly quotas. Each month a different member of the fund receives the total. 25X1

Families economize and live simply. Food, household goods, tools, services, and money continually go back and forth among trusted neighbors and relatives, reducing the need to spend for necessities. Housewives buy "day-old" products, and the most common foods are the cheapest ones: beans, tortillas, and bread. Family clothing may be sewn at home, bought secondhand, or recycled within the family. Shoes are an expensive item for most urban poor, and some, especially children, wear sandals or go barefoot. 25X1

For many families, children are an important economic resource because of the unpaid labor they perform. Girls often share child care and housework, and boys often work as apprentices to their fathers. Children also beg, carry packages, gather scrap materials, guard parked cars, become street vendors, or shine shoes. 25X1

Evolution of a Slum

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The mammoth slum of Netzahualcoyotl, or Netza, is an example of the evolution from a collection of squatter shacks and temporary housing to a functioning municipality. It illustrates the self-reliance and gives some basis for the optimism of Mexico's urban migrant population. 25X1

In the 1950s, Netzahualcoyotl, then part of the rural *municipios* of Chimalhuacan and Texcoco, began to attract persons displaced from decaying downtown tenements under rent control. Before this, the area was a sparsely populated dust bowl, part of the dry bed of Lake Texcoco. Squatters found it open and easily taken by land invasions, and 10,000 had moved into the area by 1957. The State of Mexico initiated a plan that allowed developers to gain legal title to land and to sell lots without potable water, sewage services, electricity, or roads. Residents relied on infrequent

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tank trucks for water service, but during the rainy season Netza turned into a quagmire, making delivery of even that most basic necessity impossible.

Improvements were made by the community during the late 1950s. The first well was sunk and waterlines extended to many neighborhoods, providing a relatively secure source of water through a system of community taps. In 1958 the Law of Development was passed by the State of Mexico legislature, requiring land developers to install water, street lights, and sewage service and to develop roads into the *colonias*. However, the law was not enforced until 1969.

In the 1960s, when Netza's population had soared to more than half a million, residents began to form voluntary neighborhood associations to pressure the state for services and to demand their own municipal government. By 1963 these efforts were rewarded, and the *municipio* of Ciudad Netzahualcoyotl Izcalli was created as a separate administrative unit. Today, it covers 64 square kilometers and has a population of nearly 2 million, making it the fourth-largest "city" in Mexico. In fact, Netza is considered a *municipio* but not an official city by Mexican standards.

The local government and the residents made improvements in the neighborhood. The local government legalized land titles for squatters and established schools and medical clinics. Street and housing improvements also were made. Major thoroughfares were paved, but most of the side streets remained unpaved, contributing to the dust, dirt, and health problems of the sprawling community. Many residents improved their houses by adding another room or sometimes a second story. The improved houses were constructed of brick and reinforced cement with corrugated metal or tile roofs. Most residents now have electricity on a metered basis, and most houses are connected to the sewer system. Water service has lagged, however, and a great number of households are still dependent on community taps.

In most respects, Netza is well integrated into the national, state, and local political order. The residents of Netza have been relatively successful, through neighborhood associations, at acquiring needed services from the political system. In return, they have been generally loyal to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) and the government.

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Social life has generally improved for the residents of Netza. There are locally owned open-air markets and corner stores in the *municipio,* although prices for groceries and other goods are high. There are movie theaters that provide a major source of entertainment, showing both foreign and domestic films. There is a bullfighting arena and wrestling and boxing auditoriums for these forms of entertainment. Residents of Netza also have access to the immense recreational facilities of the Federal District, particularly the parks that provide a respite from the drab sameness of the slum community. In addition, there are many churches, both Catholic and Protestant, to meet the spiritual needs of the residents. In 1973, a bishop was consecrated as Bishop of Asswan and Auxiliary of Texcoco for the Catholic diocese of Netzahualcoyotl.

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Netza serves as a bedroom community in which roughly two-thirds of the employed fathers commute to Mexico City proper to work as unskilled laborers or vendors. Most of the women are housewives; the majority of women who are employed work in domestic service, usually in the local neighborhood. These women wash, iron, babysit, or clean for slightly more affluent neighbors. Underemployment is high, about 32 percent, according to a 1974 study, and families often depend on their children to provide additional income doing odd jobs.

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Netza's officials admit that there are still many problems, but they believe in the community's future. Over time, land titles have been legalized, and basic services are slowly but surely reaching all citizens. Local authorities state that as long as they are able to foster an attitude of optimism Netza will have promise.

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The *Colonia* as a Way Out of Poverty

With the *colonia proletaria* replacing the inner-city slum over the last three decades, that portion of the urban poor owning its own housing has steadily expanded. At present, probably more than half of poor families in the cities are "property owners"—though, in many cases, legal ownership is in dispute. This represents a huge transfer of capital from the haves (including the government) to the have-nots. This unplanned redistribution of wealth may well have more economic and political importance than all the rural land reforms of Mexican governments since the revolution.

Property ownership in a *colonia proletaria* is without doubt the main means by which the poor raise their socioeconomic position. A study of economic mobility in Monterrey published in 1973 notes that, of the 28 percent of the sample that were able to move into a higher occupational level, a substantial majority were able to do so only by going into business for themselves. For the poor, property ownership is almost a prerequisite for successful self-employment. Money—to purchase a taxi, to stock a store, to buy another lot in the *colonia*—can be borrowed against the property, if there is a clear legal title. Even if there is no legal title, money can often be borrowed against the property, although at a much higher interest rate.

In many cases, the property itself is used in the business. Some residents who have larger houses rent out an extra room to a family or individual just moving into the slum. Others will set up an automobile repair shop in their yard. A front room may serve as a small restaurant. A bedroom by night may become a radio repair shop by day.

It should be emphasized that, even among the *colonia* property owners, it is only the exceptional family that is able to raise its socioeconomic status. In the 1973 Monterrey study, 58 percent of the sample remained in the same category in which they had begun and 14 percent dropped into a lower category. Most self-owned enterprises are only marginally successful, and many fail completely—often entailing the loss of the property that made the attempt possible.

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Political Attitudes and Activity

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The Mindset of the Urban Poor

The classic studies of the Mexican national character, from Samuel Ramos to Octavio Paz, stress the suspicion and cynicism of the average Mexican. If this is true for the average Mexican, it is even more true for the urban poor. The urban poor Mexican regards most people—his spouse, his employer, his priest, his neighbor, the police, the businessmen, the labor leaders, the foreigners, the politicians—to be corrupt and untrustworthy. "Expect the worst and you won't be disappointed" is a good rule to live by. The political attitudes of the urban poor must be considered within this context.

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Figure 7. Daily Life

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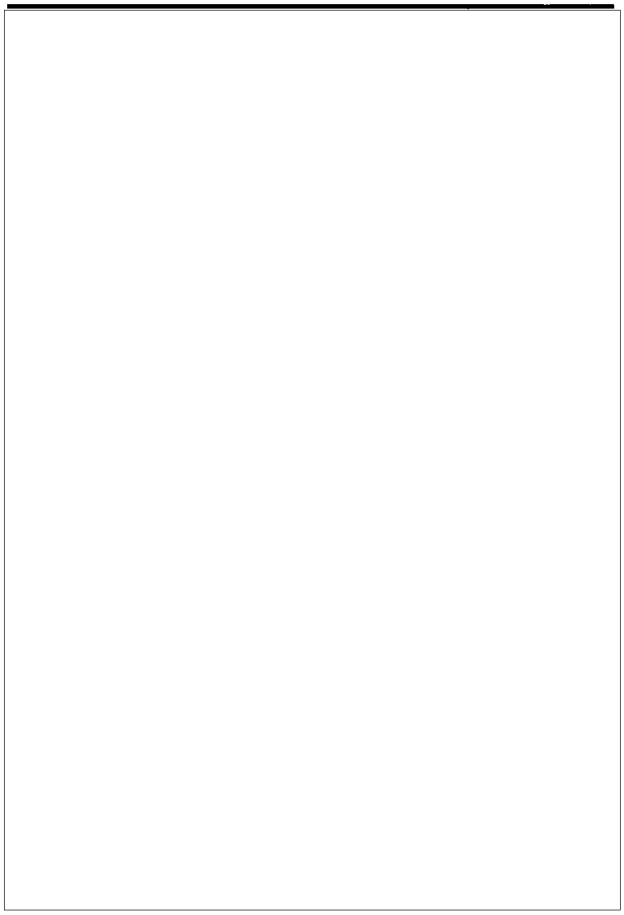

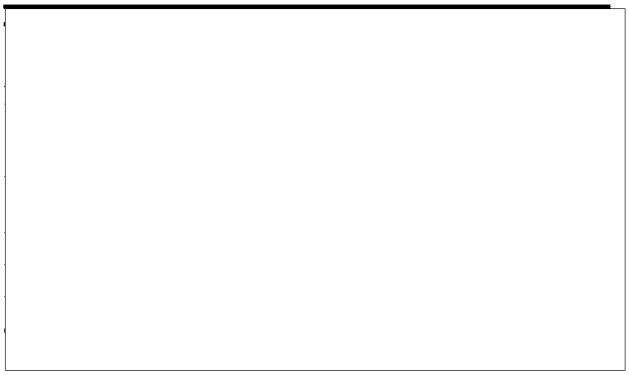

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Political Action

Political action by the urban poor is oriented toward making demands upon the system for specific local goals. These include requests for legal title to land and provision of basic services, particularly water, drainage, and electricity, or a school or clinic.

The major goal of the urban poor is to hold legal title to land. Squatters who acquire land by invasions of either public or private land must petition the government to assign them title. Likewise, someone who purchased a plot of land from an unscrupulous developer who may not have owned the land himself will have to petition the government for redress. The granting of legal title to disputed land will often be used by the government to placate a community. Residents can say with pride that they own their homes, even if few basic services are available.

Urban slumdwellers are formally represented in the PRI by the National Confederation of Popular Organizations (CNOP). Low-income residents are tied to the CNOP through municipal unions. For example, residents of Naucalpan, a low-income *municipio* in Mexico City, recently formed the Mexican Front of Low Income Neighborhoods and petitioned to join the CNOP. Associations of this type can serve as a connection with the government in efforts to promote neighborhood improvements.

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The urban poor make demands on the system by means of escalating levels of involvement and action. The first step might be taken by a *cacique*, or neighborhood political boss, who is linked as a client to one or more patrons in the PRI-government apparatus. He might ask his patron for a basic service or special treatment, such as the location of a food store owned by CONASUPO, the state food supply system, in his *colonia*.

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If this request by the *cacique* receives no response, a petition may be drawn up by residents of the *colonia* for presentation to the authorities. These representatives of the community can often be found in their dirty, ragged clothes in the corridors of the bureaucracy waiting for their all-too-brief meeting with a government official. If the petition receives a positive response and the service is provided, the *colonia* considers itself privileged; if there is no response, then they realize some other neighborhood received the scarce benefits, and the community leaders will wait until next year to petition again.

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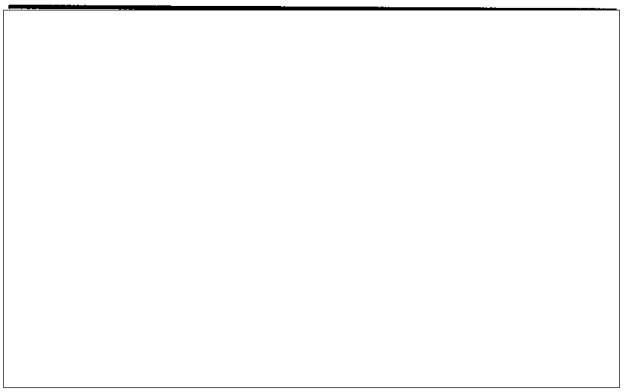

Sometimes the residents may take a further step and organize a demonstration with placards describing their needs. The demonstration, usually including women and children, will involve hundreds and sometimes thousands of residents marching outside the office of some local, state, or national official. The media will often be informed of the demonstration, giving publicity to the plight of the *colonia* and further spurring the system to accommodate the residents' demands.

Women play a key role in demonstrations, as well as in other political actions in the slums. The women and children will frequently act as a buffer between the community and the authorities, preventing eviction from illegally seized land or the arrest of a local resident. On occasion, women have gained widespread sympathetic treatment from the media by wearing native dress and standing in front of bulldozers sent to raze their illegal housing.

Rarely do the demands for action by the urban poor spill over into violence. The only case in recent memory in the Mexico City area concerned a sudden fare increase by a private bus company in Netzahaulcoyotl in 1981, which was followed by rioting and bus burning. The government responded quickly by taking control of Netza's private system and instituting the subsidized low fares standard in Mexico City.

Radical Slum Organizations

The early 1970s saw the rise of radical squatter groups in several cities of northern Mexico. Although these groups claim to represent hundreds and sometimes thousands of slumdwellers, they actually represent only a small percentage of the millions of urban poor. Although not truly national in scope, the National Coordinator of Popular Urban Movements (CONAMUP), which has met annually since 1979, has affiliated slum organizations in the states of Guerrero, Nuevo Leon, Oaxaca, Chiapas, Mexico, and the Federal District. CONAMUP has been involved in various demonstrations in Mexico's cities but is most active in the poorest *colonias* of the Federal District. 25X1

Tierra y Libertad (Land and Liberty), founded in 1971 in Monterrey, is one of the earliest and—for a while—the most effective of the radical squatter groups. TyL was the group name taken by a radical bloc of virtually autonomous squatter *colonias* within the metropolitan area. The leaders, many of them college educated, preached a radical socialist ideology and promised protection and basic services to the squatter population. The leadership maintained complete control over the inhabitants through "people's committees," which regulated everything from services and law enforcement to new admissions to the *colonias*. They hoped that their separatist ideology would spread among the urban poor, but squatter communities in other parts of Mexico that have assumed the TyL name, such as those in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, and Mazatlan, Sinaloa, have not followed the TyL philosophy of separation and local autonomy. 25X1 25X1

The government of Monterrey, which had originally ignored the TyL, became concerned as the city grew to surround the autonomous area. The authorities responded by instituting the FOMERREY program, offering legal title to the land and basic city services, such as water and electricity, to the squatters, thereby militating against the TyL philosophy of separation from the system. The TyL community, which numbers between 40,000 and 100,000 residents, split in 1984 into two factions. One faction sought to retain their autonomy while an opposing group supported integration into the Mexican system. This split has brought violent demonstrations, and the leader of one faction recently served time in jail. 25X1 25X1 25X1

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Students at the University of Chihuahua organized another radical slum organization, the Committee for Popular Defense (CDP). The CDP in Ciudad Chihuahua has an estimated 13,000 to 50,000 members and has expanded to include the urban poor in other northern cities. A colony in Monterrey has an estimated 50,000 residents. A smaller, but more active, group of between 12,000 and 14,000 residents in Ciudad Juarez has become adept at using the US media to gain attention. Much of the CDP's support in Juarez is attributed to the leadership's success in intimidating the local government into providing virtually free services to CDP neighborhoods, many of which are on illegally occupied land.

Until recently, these organizations were considered a tolerable nuisance and therefore allowed to demonstrate and agitate without fear of reprisal. However, recent economic problems, particularly in the border areas, have increased pressure from landowners and businessmen on local and state governments to take measures against illegal actions of urban squatter groups, such as CDP and TyL, according to Embassy reports. In time, most of these groups probably will be either co-opted or destroyed.

Factors Working Against Political Action

Mexican society, in the slums as elsewhere, is organized around vertical patron-client relationships. Mass action on a horizontal class basis is virtually unknown, although some leftist groups, peasant and labor organizations, and the official political party itself tend to hide their vertical structure under horizontal rhetoric. The fact remains that to the average Mexican the way to get ahead—or avoid falling behind—is not to unite with one's fellows but rather to ride the coattails of a more powerful personage.

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These patrons may or may not have some connection with the *colonia*. They may be political bosses, bureaucrats, or welfare officials living outside the *colonia* but closely associated with its welfare and political orientation. They could be *caciques* living in the *colonia* or simply better off residents who are in a position to grant favors to poorer residents. Many patrons will have no connection whatsoever with the *colonia*. This group could include employers, ex-employers, relatives, *compadres* or godparents, city politicians or bureaucrats without direct links to the *colonia*, union officials, and the like.

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Given the heterogeneity of the population of most of the *colonias*, it is unlikely that a majority of the people would have either the same patrons or the same interests. Although, as we have pointed out in the previous section, residents are sometimes able to unite effectively to achieve very tangible and limited ends such as a better water supply or paved roads, they are usually unable to form permanent organizations with broader political goals. (Some of the radical organizations of the north may be a partial exception to this generalization.) For many of the men who work outside the *colonia*, their political interests—if any—will center around where they work rather than where they live. In short, the *colonias* are very difficult to unite for political purposes either from without or from within.

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Moreover, most studies of the Mexican urban poor show them to be more fatalistic and apathetic than angry. Although many believe that they can change their own lives—at least marginally—few believe that they can have any effect on the overall course of the nation's political or economic system. For better or worse, the government and the PRI will make the decisions and the poor will have to make the best of it through hard work and whatever connections they may have. In this, the poor may have a firmer grasp on Mexican reality than many of those who try to organize them.

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The Future

Mexico's Coming Urban Crisis?

The evidence is clear that, up to the present, Mexico's slums have been a safety valve and not a tinderbox. Large-scale urban violence on the part of the poor has been almost completely absent. Such outbreaks of urban violence as have taken place—Tlatelolco, for example—have been conflicts between the students (an upper-middle-class group) and the government, with one exception, the 1981 bus riot in Netzahaulcoyotl. The poor, except for those hired as government thugs, have not taken part.

The political stability of the urban poor has increased as the inner-city *vecindad* has given way to the outlying *colonia*. There has been a great shift of wealth in the form of land from the haves to the have-nots, and the poor have further added to their economic worth by building and improving housing and by obtaining basic services that increase the value of their property. Many *colonia* residents have also been able to use their property directly or indirectly to establish themselves in business—and a very few of these have been able to use such businesses to raise themselves into the middle class. although cynical about the government itself, the poor are generally pleased with their progress and supportive of the official government party.

The situation is changing, however, especially in greater Mexico City. The Valley of Mexico—essentially the area available for greater Mexico City—is rapidly becoming saturated with people. Mexico City urban planners have established the firm goal that the total population of greater Mexico City will not exceed 21.3 million people by 2000. Of this 21.3 million inhabitants, 14.1 million would reside in Mexico City proper and 7.2 million would live in its urban periphery in the State of Mexico. The Mexican officials set this population limit because of the scarcity of land and water resources at costs supportable by public revenues. Mexico City, for example, must now import its water across mountains at great expense via the Cutzamala transfer system developed to meet the city's current water supply needs. Yet, even last year, petitioners requested the authorities in the State of Mexico to restructure the water rates because the water available in the outlying Mexico City housing areas was too expensive for the poor.

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The population of greater Mexico City is now 16.3 million, compared with 13.6 million in 1980, and is expanding at an average annual growth rate of 3.6 percent. At its present rate of growth, greater Mexico City will contain 21 million people in 1990,

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The deteriorating living conditions in Mexico City, considered one of the world's most polluted cities, concern all its residents and may be the vital limit to the city's growth. According to Mexican ecological studies, 10 percent of the population will suffer from irreversible pulmonary, coronary, respiratory, or cerebral illness directly caused by excessive air pollution. The Mexican "tolerated level" of 275 micrograms per cubic meter of total suspended particulates was exceeded in 75 percent of the downtown area and in 20 percent of the peripheral areas of the city. These "tolerated" pollution levels far exceed the US standard of 75 micrograms per cubic meter.

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Individual air pollutants cause special health problems. Lead concentrations have been described as reaching daily levels of 14.5 micrograms (the US national primary air standard specifies 1.5 micrograms). In addition, vast quantities of sulfur dioxide enter the air from 2.2 million vehicles with untreated fuel as well as unregulated industrial smokestacks. Mexico City levels are measured at about 360 micrograms per cubic meter in contrast to the US standards that require a mean of 80 micrograms per cubic meter.

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Possible Political Fallout

The political fallout of Mexico's urban crisis is less likely to result from declines in the quality of life in the cities than from Mexican Government attempts to reverse those declines. As natural growth alone will put the population of greater Mexico City above the 20 million mark by 1990 or soon after, the government must not only stop migration into the valley but also encourage native-born residents to leave the capital. This will present an immense political problem. From prehispanic times, Tenochtitlan—or Mexico City—has been the nation's center of culture, excitement, good living, power, and opportunity. Every Mexican considers it his right to go to the capital to better himself, to escape past failures, or simply to be part of the action. No government has ever made a serious attempt to restrict the Mexican citizen's freedom of movement; the extension of government authoritarianism into this area would be without precedent.

At a minimum, the easy tolerance of land invasions and less-than-legal titles will probably end. Petitions for extended basic services—especially water—will be rejected. The government will have neither the financial resources nor, more important, the water to supply new *colonias* and extensions of old ones. Taxes and fees may well be raised to many times their former levels and their collection rigorously enforced. In extreme cases, well-established squatters with years of residence may be forced out by police or military action and their homes bulldozed. At the same time, strenuous efforts will be made to keep migrants in rural villages and to divert others to secondary cities—increasing pressures and lowering living standards in both cases.

As the decade progresses, the potential for instability will increase. If other elements of Mexican society, especially the middle class and organized labor, become dissatisfied to the point of violence—and the students are always ready—the urban poor may have their own serious grievances and be ready to take part and carry the violence to extremes that would not otherwise have been likely. (It is worth noting that the urban poor, in this century at least, have never initiated action on their own. In all of the very few cases of violence by the urban poor—most of them early in the revolution—the violence was initiated by nonpoor elements of the urban population.)

Violence by the urban poor in the late 1980s or early 1990s, while a clear danger, is not a certainty. On the one hand, the government is taking actions (not all of them brutal) to decentralize the population and attract rather than force people to less congested areas. The current national plans, developed in part with World Bank assistance, selected 59 medium-size cities to serve as alternative growth areas. New housing and industry are being concentrated in these selected cities and away from the capital. On the other hand, as it becomes known that conditions are deteriorating for the poor in the cities and especially that old opportunities for advancement through property ownership are being closed, many will seek their fortunes in other areas—such as north of the Rio Grande.

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Moreover, even under conditions of extreme provocation, the patience of the Mexican poor should not be underestimated. In fact, increased economic privation could have the unexpected effect of increasing the value of patron-client relationships and thereby strengthening the system. The slumdweller, clearly understanding that there was not enough for all and that there would be some winners and some losers, might choose to "be good" and ally himself even more closely with the status quo in an effort to assure himself a place among the winners

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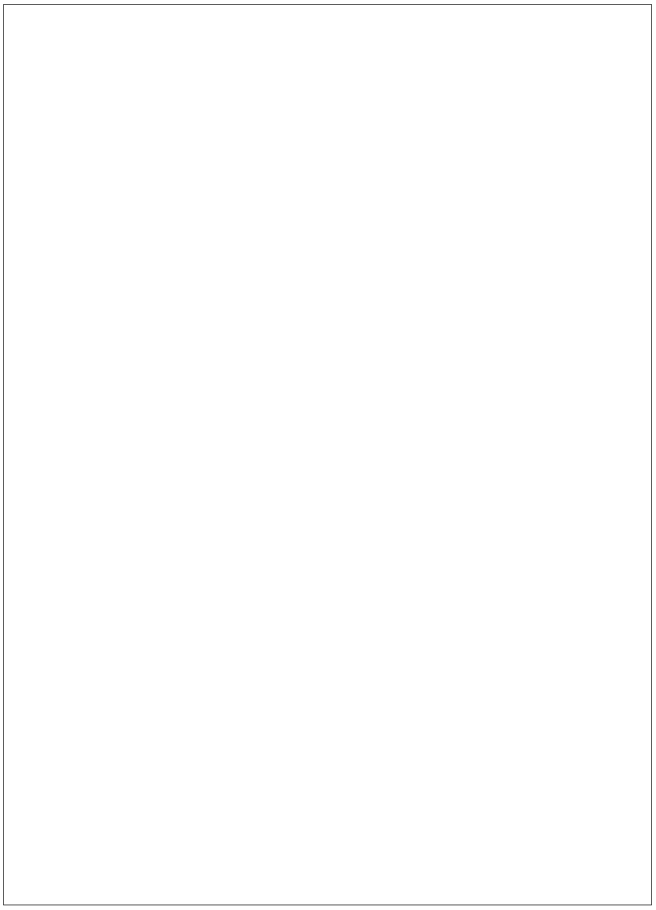

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